Evenings and Weekends Jul 15, 2024 7 min read

“During the Pandemic” is Now: Why E&W Still Has a COVID Policy

Updated: 3 days ago

By Daniella Barreto and Daniel Sarah Karasik

There is a lot of misinformation about COVID. This preventable disease still racks up thousands of cases a week, yet our public health institutions and governments have all but eliminated their response.

COVID is the third-leading cause of death in Canada, and evidence suggests it may contribute to the leading two: heart disease/strokes and cancer. But death isn’t the only negative outcome. Every infection comes with at *least* a 1 in 10 risk of contracting long COVID, leading to persistent, long-term symptoms.

As an equity-focused and values-driven organization, Evenings & Weekends is committed to acknowledging the ongoing equity impacts of COVID. COVID is worse for some groups compared to others because of the systemic oppressions that we address in our work every day: racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and the exploitation and resulting precarity of low-income people.

We also acknowledge the reality that nobody is invincible. There is undeniable evidence that COVID is a full-body disease that damages our brains, hearts, blood vessels, lungs, and immune systems. Despite what we are told, COVID is not mild. The “S” in SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID, stands for “severe,” after all. The virus’s immediate impact may not feel extreme, but it’s not always possible to tell what damage our brains or blood vessels or immune systems have sustained until later.

Some people experience long-lasting symptoms after contracting COVID (Long COVID), which can include extreme fatigue, cognitive damage (“brain fog”), breathing difficulties, and organ damage. While some people improve, many do not; instead, they experience ongoing debilitating symptoms. The unmitigated spread of COVID, which is transmitted mainly through the air, has been described as one of the biggest mass-disabling events in history, and the oncoming impacts of Long COVID on society “so large as to be unfathomable.”

Faced with this reality, we’ve designed a workplace COVID health and safety policy to help protect ourselves, our colleagues, and our clients.

Our COVID policy — which is included in the contracts we sign with new clients — specifies that we're a company that conducts our activities remotely as a rule, and that all in-person activities we offer are governed by a detailed, evidence-based set of health and safety guidelines that recognize the ongoing threat COVID poses.

We require respirators (N95 masks or equivalents) to be worn by anyone medically able to do so at our in-person events, as people who have symptoms and those who don't (or don't *yet!*) can still spread the virus through breathing, speaking, coughing, and sneezing. We require anyone who has cold- or flu-like symptoms to stay home and attend virtually — even if those symptoms are minor and a COVID rapid test is negative, as we know such tests produce a high rate of false negatives. We also require good ventilation and air filtration in meeting spaces if possible.

We're very aware of the culture of denial and resistance to masking. Therefore, we've written this piece to push against this reality, to support our clients in understanding the importance of following our policy, and to highlight the inadequacy of current public health responses.

Here's why else we made an Evenings & Weekends COVID policy, and why we stick by it:

1. There is no anti-oppression without disability justice. Immunocompromised people — including people who've had organ transplants, those receiving cancer treatment, or those on immunosuppressive drugs to treat autoimmune conditions such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis — are more vulnerable to really bad outcomes if they get COVID.

Immunocompromised and other disabled people who would be badly impacted by COVID should be able to engage in public life. All groups that experience systemic oppression include disabled people, and groups that experience systemic oppression consistently face health inequities.

Children are another equity-deserving group that includes disabled people. Their agency and power is limited in society; they're required to attend schools in-person with no prevention or mitigation strategies in place to

protect them. Despite claims to the contrary early in the pandemic, children are also susceptible to the harms of COVID and often silently struggle with the impacts of Long COVID and repeat infections. COVID isn't only a risk to "vulnerable" people: every COVID infection makes a person more vulnerable because of the silent and accumulating damage it does to the body.

Early in the pandemic, we saw community organizing practices that imagined a world where disabled people were cared for and prioritized. At Evenings & Weekends, this is the world we're still fighting for.

- READ: 10 Principles of Disability Justice; What Does Disability Justice During a Pandemic Look Like?; "There are disabled people in the future"; You are not entitled to our deaths; What will never be again.

2. COVID is a labour issue. Many jobs require a lot of face-to-face contact with others, yet offer limited paid time off in case of sickness. These workers become infected again and again by their working conditions, and are then forced to choose between working while sick or losing the income they need to pay for their basic needs. These exploitative, disabling labour dynamics are shaped by forces much bigger than the policies of any one workplace. But at Evenings & Weekends, we're trying our best to push back against those trends – to protect workers from becoming sick and/or disabled at work, and to make our own workplace as accessible as we can.

We also see our organizational commitments to COVID mitigation as a way of safeguarding the quality and reliability of our services. We need our team to be as well as can be, both because that matters intrinsically and so that we can deliver work at the highest possible standards.

- READ: COVID-19 is a workers' rights issue; COVID is a labour issue (free zine); Mass Long-Covid Disability Threatens the Economy; How has long COVID affected Canada's workforce?; Joint Letter: Layered Approach Required for Airborne Transmission (Ontario Federation of Labour)

3. Solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and/or Palestinian people means stopping the spread. In addition to trying to survive a genocide, Palestinians are still exposed to COVID, with little to no way to mitigate that added risk. Forced into close quarters, which exacerbates airborne viral transmission, they have little to no access to hospitals, vaccinations, or treatments for COVID (or other medical conditions).

We also know that the spread of disease has been a colonial weapon throughout history. Poor access to healthcare is reflected globally in the difference in health outcomes experienced between Indigenous and settler communities. In Canada, Indigenous Peoples have experienced massive harms from COVID: losses to culture, family, and language.

According to Statistics Canada in a 2023 report, Black people in Canada were most likely to have had multiple COVID infections. In this context, slowing the spread — and viral mutation — of COVID reflects an anti-colonial commitment: we want to do our part to stop new variants from developing and spreading around the world.

- READ: Palestinian Solidarity, COVID-19, and the Struggle for Liberation (zine - free option available); World's slow recognition of airborne transmission of COVID was 'most egregious public health error in modern history'; Racism in the Time of COVID-19; Systemic Inequities Increase Covid-19 Risk for Indigenous People in Canada

4. While they reduce deaths and hospitalizations, vaccines are not enough. COVID vaccines are incredibly helpful in protecting many of us from severe short-term impacts of the virus. However, with unmitigated viral spread that spurs the growth of new variants, we're stuck in a losing game of catch-up. And vaccines don't prevent Long COVID. A vaccine-only approach is not sufficient; we need a layered approach to preventing COVID infections. We can't develop vaccines fast enough to match the speed of viral mutation in billions of potential hosts – not when we have no protections working to slow that spread down. This is why massive events with no protections are especially concerning.

At Evenings & Weekends, we try to push in the opposite direction by maintaining the protections we can at our in-person events.

- READ: It's long past time for a more comprehensive Covid treatment approach; CDC COVID-19 Vaccine Effectiveness Update; Current COVID boosters offer good protection against severe outcomes but less so against JN.1

5. Long COVID is taking a toll on workers, with negative consequences for workplaces.
In Canada as of June 2023, 1 in 9 people reported experiencing long-lasting symptoms after infection with COVID. After three infections, more than 1 in 3 people reported experiencing the same. This trend suggests that over the long run, the only way to avoid getting Long COVID may be to avoid getting COVID.

Many healthcare workers, hailed as heroes during the earlier stages of the pandemic, are now experiencing Long COVID, sometimes to the point of being unable to work themselves. In Quebec as of fall 2023, 10% of healthcare workers reported long-lasting symptoms after a COVID infection. In the UK, a group of nurses is suing the government for the life-changing disabilities they acquired from catching COVID at work after not being provided with adequate workplace health and safety protections.

These devastating effects on healthcare workers in particular have far-reaching equity implications for patients and communities who rely on their care. Pilots, drivers, firefighters, and other workers responsible for safe operation of equipment and clear decision-making may all be impaired by Long COVID, with serious consequences for the public. The impacts on caregivers and partners of people with Long COVID are also often overlooked.

- WATCH: The Atlantic's pandemics journalist, Ed Yong, at SFU One Health Lecture: "What Reporting on Long COVID Taught Me"
- READ: Long COVID and the Economy: There is Money in Prevention; Long COVID, Disability, and the Workplace; Report says long COVID could impact economy and be 'mass disabling event' in Canada; A smoldering threat to wildland firefighters; "Debilitating a Generation": Expert Warns That Long COVID